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Crossroads on Global Warming

As it is required to do under international treaty, the Bush administration has sent to the United Nations a report on global warming that is much more pessimistic than its earlier calculations about the environmental damage that unchecked warming could cause. A White House spokesman, Scott McClellan, said the report is reason "to move forward on the president's strategies for addressing the challenge of climate change." There is only one thing wrong with this picture. President Bush has no serious strategies for climate change.

Indeed, Mr. Bush has essentially withdrawn from the field. He rejected the Kyoto accord on climate change and repudiated a campaign pledge to seek firm limits on carbon dioxide, the main contributor to the warming of the earth's atmosphere. He then proposed a voluntary scheme. It appears from the U.N. report to consist largely of finding ways to adapt to warming instead of preventing it. Congress has done no better.

The only encouraging news is on the state level. Massachusetts and New Hampshire have approved bills aimed at cutting power plant emissions of carbon dioxide. In New York, a commission appointed by Gov. George Pataki will shortly give him a set of aggressive recommendations to help the state reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases.

Encouraging as the state actions are, global warming requires a national response. There is one last chance to get the ball rolling in Congress this term and to send a positive signal to other countries. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee will soon begin writing a comprehensive air pollution bill. The committee has before it a strong proposal framed by the chairman, James Jeffords, and a less ambitious but useful plan advanced by a few power companies that have at last faced up to their obligation to address the issue. There is no comparable Bush initiative on the table. The Jeffords and industry plans address the four major pollutants: mercury; nitrogen oxides that produce smog; sulfur dioxide, which causes acid rain; and carbon dioxide. Mr. Bush's sketchy "Clear Skies" proposal addresses only the first three.

To Mr. Jeffords, that makes the Bush plan a nonstarter. What's interesting is that some of the president's putative allies among the power companies — including Northeastern utilities like Consolidated Edison and Public Service Electric and Gas of New Jersey — see things the same way. The reason is summed up in what managers like to call "business certainty." They know that carbon dioxide will eventually be regulated, and they would like to begin now

to tailor investment strategies to deal with all four pollutants at once. The technologies that work for mercury, sulfur and nitrogen oxide — so-called "end of pipe" controls like scrubbers — do virtually nothing to reduce carbon dioxide. But there are other strategies — switching to cleaner fuels, investing in "clean coal" technologies and alternative fuels, making existing plants more efficient — that could help utilities respond to clean air concerns in a more coordinated, cost-efficient way.

Unfortunately, the biggest and dirtiest utilities, which make the most noise in Congress and are also among Mr. Bush's biggest contributors, hate the four-pollutant approach because they rely almost entirely on coal and their cleanup costs are likely to be quite large. Senator Jeffords's task is to make sure that his bill commands a big enough majority in his committee to justify bringing it to the Senate floor, where a brutal battle awaits.

The Senate may be as far as any bill goes — the House has not been hospitable to imaginative thinking on energy and the environment. But it's important to get a good plan on the table before the fall elections, and to start moving the country along the right path. The choices could not be clearer. One is to continue to rely on older technologies that condemn us to a future of polluted cities and further warming. The other is to redesign our energy system so as to reduce America's dependence on carbon-based fuels and send a signal to the rest of the world that we are finally getting serious about climate change.

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